

The Two Davids

Graham Watson examines how much the failure of the Alliance was due to the failures of its leaders.

The astonishing thing about the four years in which the Alliance was captained by Davids Steel and Owen is the amount of time spent by hundreds of idealistic people in sterile argument about the internal arrangements of the two parties' cohabitation. That their joint and several leadership failed to overcome this was without doubt its greatest failure. Steel and Owen failed to unite their followers behind a coherent vision of an alternative course to Thatcherism. Why?

Richard Holme has described the Alliance as a tragic comedy: in the first act (1977–81) the political space opens for the Liberal Party to be taken seriously and the SDP to form; in the second (1981–83) the two parties mount the strongest third-party challenge since the war to the established two-party hegemony and almost equal Labour in the polls; and in the third (the denouement, 1983–87) it all goes horribly wrong. No progress is made and the Alliance subsequently collapses in a hailstorm of recriminations. Perhaps unjustly, but inevitably, the buck stops at the top.

A major difficulty lay in the similarity of their personal appeal. Both in their mid-forties, both telegenic politicians, each ambitious and with a certain flair. They were natural rivals. But their differences posed substantial problems too. Owen represented the well-to-do, Oxbridge-educated, English upper-middle classes. He was steeped in the easy graces of money and cosmopolitan society. Steel sought refuge in a more calvinistic, self-denying, introverted Scots tradition. His was the way of the campaigner for the common man. While the differences might in other circumstances have been complementary, each man tended to deny his hinterland and approach. But these governed for each the ground rules on which their relationship had to be based. And the rules were different. For Steel, personal friendship was a prerequisite. For Owen, a business partnership would suffice.

The second determinant in the affair was the difference between the political approaches

of the two. Owen was a moving star in the firmament, exploring new galaxies, picking up cosmic dust in the post-Keynes explosion. In a new party, where many perceived the 1983 manifesto to have been proven a losing proposition, he found room to develop these ideas. Steel was firmly wedded to the John Rawls ethic of social Liberalism, as was the Liberal Party whose policy-making process he never sought to dominate.

Owen and Steel were never, in the latter's 1987 general election quip, 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee'. On the contrary, they were decidedly 'not bosom pals'.¹ Relations ranged from the acid spreading of stories by the Owen camp about Steel having suffered a nervous breakdown to the farcical combined family lunch at Steel's Pimlico flat where only claret or whisky were on offer, while Owen liked lager and champagne. Nor were the woolly-jumpered Judy or the debonaire Debbie well matched to smooth the course of conviviality between their respective husbands.

At work, both leaders were under attack. Owen was opposed in succession by Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers and by a growing section of the SDP, in particular by those who favoured merger with the Liberals. Steel's strategy of realignment was challenged ever more irately in a Liberal Party which, in Jo Grimond's words, tended at moments of greatest need to turn to putty in its leader's hands. The furious monotony of party controversy was a drag factor in both men's approaches to Alliance. The solidarity between them which it might have engendered showed itself only in brief flashes of uncharacteristic mutual generosity; *schadenfreude* was the more ready emotion in both camps.

Defence policy – the issue which, as Crewe and King point out, disrupted the Labour Party for much of the postwar period² – became a considerable problem for the Alliance. For David Owen, a hawkish position was a talisman. For Steel, it was a betrayal of mankind's potential. Yet major decisions, such as the siting of cruise missiles in the UK and the replacement for Polaris nuclear submarines, arose

during the parliament. Steel, with one eye on public opinion and the other on Alliance unity, attempted to move the Liberal Party away from what he regarded as a dangerous course of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Liberal opponents, some with personal ambitions to the leadership and others in opposition to merger, exploited the issue successfully to promote their case by wounding their leader (in the case of the former, only to back down from their policy position a year later). Steel then let slip some details of the contents of the report of the joint commission on defence policy and Owen hastily overreacted, thus dashing a subsequent attempt at compromise too close to a general election for recovery.

Agreement between the parties on individual policies was rendered all the more difficult by a fundamental difference of approach between their leaders. Thatcherism was the order of the decade. Owen was prepared to come to terms with it; Steel was not. Nor was public opposition to Thatcherism ever quite strong enough to catapult the Alliance forward. The runes of the opinion polls were pored over and re-read. The business community was tested. But class warfare was still a powerful determinant of the island's politics. Mrs Thatcher's troops had survived their wobbly start. She was at the centre of Thatcherism, and neither Owen's sub-Thatcherite posture nor Steel's steely opposition to its social consequences satisfied the appetite of a middle class engaged in a nihilism not seen in Britain since the 1920s.

The Tories were blessed by a divided opposition. The Alliance could make little headway against a Labour Party whose low water mark had been met under Michael Foot. Neil Kinnock, though never to enjoy the credit, had put his party back afloat on a rising tide. The Alliance's inability to appeal to Labour supporters was clear from its very lack of clarity. While Steel met the Nottinghamshire miners and the TUC during the coal dispute, Owen courted coal boss Ian McGregor, the government's hatchet man.



The end of the road: Richmond at the end of the 1987 campaign.

On issues of constitutional reform, agreement between Liberals and their SDP counterparts was never hard to find. Yet as an issue of interest to the electorate, constitutional reform never found the potency in the 1980s which it was to generate a decade later. Despite the Alliance's best efforts, it was not sufficient as a basis for a winning campaign in a general election in which the two parties still talked of the issues which interested them rather than those which interested the voters. Would a consistent message have been possible on other issues? Reform of pensions policy, attitudes to the National Health Service, approaches to crime and policing, the merits of public versus private transport; all were areas where disagreement was never more than papered over. For the 1986 local government elections, the SDP launched its manifesto without informing the Liberals of either timing or content. The parties were engaged separately in creative thinking.

It is tempting in a third party to blame the media for failing to give fair coverage to one's ideas. In the 1980s such concerns were amply justified, as a former editor of *The Times* has made clear in a seminal autobiographical work. With control of the public print and broadcasting media in fewer minds, and with the Alliance unable to open them, the

medium for communicating a distinctive message was severely limited. In defence of the media, however, there was rarely a distinctive Alliance message to communicate.

Nor were the two parties organised in any synchronous fashion to fight a common campaign. Much can be ascribed to mutual fear. If the imbalance in numbers of MPs had favoured the SDP before 1983, feeding Liberal paranoia, the converse was true from '83 to '87. An early Alliance slogan had been 'working together': yet while in some constituencies party members were being told by party headquarters to work together against their wishes, in others they were ordered not to unite behind a general election standard-bearer even where local agreement was possible.

The obvious question to any third party is: 'faced with the choice, which of the other parties would you put in to government?' This proved the rock on which the Alliance was to founder. Interviewed on *Weekend World* on 12 April 1987, before the election was announced, Owen skillfully refused to be drawn on which party he preferred, as had Steel on a number of occasions. But on 26 May, in a lengthy general election interview on *Panorama* in which the two Davids were interviewed together by

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Shirley Williams, *Politics is for People* (Penguin, 1981)
 Des Wilson, *Battle for Power* (Sphere Books, 1987)
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 Colin Seymour-Ure, 'The SDP and the Media', *Political Quarterly* 53, 1982

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Sir Robin Day, Owen said he would regard the Conservatives as 'the lesser evil' and that Labour's position (on Britain's security) was 'unacceptable'. The pass was sold.

The Liberal-SDP Alliance never quite made the grade. While the Liberals' strength was growing, particularly in local government, the party had not been able to consolidate its new support. Nor had the SDP caused sufficient defections from Labour to sustain a long-haul campaign; and it had failed almost entirely to attract prominent Conservatives.

The two Alliance leaders found themselves locked in a pantomime horse, each pulling in different directions, with large sections of both parties cheering the resulting confusion. Just entering middle age, neither had the experience to analyse his situation and plan a way out. Though Owen had served briefly as Foreign Secretary after one or two junior ministerial positions, and Steel had completed eighteen years in Parliament and seven as party leader, neither had substantial experience of life outside politics. Nor was either entirely convinced that the game was worth the candle. In a cruel symbiotic twist to their relationship, however, each was determined to prevent the other from scooping the prize. If there was ever a prize to scoop, they succeeded. In any event, the third force had to wait a decade before beginning to realise again the potential it had shown in the 1977 Lib-Lab agreement.

Graham Watson was head of the Liberal leader's private office in the House of Commons 1983-87. In 1994 he became the first Liberal Democrat to be elected to the European Parliament. He is currently seeking a publisher for his book on the Alliance in the 1983-87 Parliament.

Notes:

- 1 The quote is David Steel's, in a television interview.
- 2 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995).

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